

# Hialeah Park's return may rest on slot machine deal

Hialeah Mayor Julio Robaina is poised to play spoiler in Miami-Dade County's slots referendum.

Robaina vows to campaign against the January referendum – and urge Hialeah residents to vote no – unless the city's famous but shuttered thoroughbred track wins new racing dates, allowing it to reopen and potentially install slot machines.

The popular mayor's strategy to save Hialeah Park seeks to tug at voters' heart strings – and bring more jobs to Miami-Dade's second largest city.

„Is it a sentimental vote? A conservation vote? An anti-gambling vote? I'll take all of them.“

Robaina, who says the referendum could tank without Hialeah's backing, is trying to pressure the state Legislature to give the track racing dates and perhaps a chance at slot machines.

The move could have some larger political ramifications. Pro-Hialeah lawmakers could raise the stakes by attempting to block any deal between the Seminoles and the state in the tribe's bid to expand its games – unless Gov. Charlie Crist links any expansion of Seminole gambling with an opening for Hialeah Park.

The scenario would tie legislative approval of the Seminole's deal to a separate package of legislation that would grant bingo-style slots to parimutuels statewide, including Hialeah Park.

Crist has been working to extract up to \$ 100 million a year from Seminole casinos. The tribe, a sovereign nation, does not pay state taxes.

For years, Robaina has unsuccessfully lobbied the Legislature for new racing dates at Hialeah Park, closed since 2001, but the January referendum on slots for Miami-Dade has given him new leverage.

If county voters approve the referendum allowing Las Vegas-style slot machines at Miami-Dade's three open parimutuels, Hialeah Park would be left out. For the grand old dame of racing, no slots equals no future, Robaina says.

„I want Hialeah Park treated just like any other parimutuel, so they have the opportunity to have slot machines... I want the opportunity to have jobs in my community. I want the opportunity to share in the revenue. I want to have opportunity, bottom line, to have Hialeah Park open.“

The park's owner, John Brunetti, has plans to develop the 220-acre site, a pastoral stretch of green at the heart of working-class Hialeah. A landmark since 1926, it's the home of an iconic flock of pink flamingos and a French-inspired clubhouse on the National Register of Historic Places.

Preservationists say it has the potential to be Hialeah's version of Central Park.

„I do not want to give in to the notion that the only answer is some sort of development,“ Robaina said. „I want to be able to send that message to this community, to the Legislature, to the Dade County commission, to everyone, how important this particular 220 acres is to the city of Hialeah and the whole South Florida area.“

Miami-Dade parimutuels reacted with dismay at the thought of Hialeah's possible opposition.

„The voters of Hialeah should know that passage of the January 29th slots referendum can serve as an opportunity for achieving viability at Hialeah Park,“ said a statement by Sarah Bascom, spokeswoman for the Yes for a Greater Miami-Dade

Campaign, spearheaded by Flagler Dog Track and Calder Race Course.

„If the referendum fails, then Hialeah Park’s hopes for a future will be finished,” the statement said.

Under a 2004 constitutional amendment, only parimutuels that had live races or games for two years prior to the amendment can open casinos. Hialeah didn’t.

Robaina’s new campaign worried some lawmakers.

„It’s just not possible to do anything about it,” said Rep. Carlos Lopez-Cantera, chairman of the House committee that regulates gaming. „We’ve tried last session and the session before, but we’ve met considerable opposition from members in the Senate.”

He said lawmakers wouldn’t be able to get to the issue before the Jan. 29 vote unless Crist includes it in the ongoing special session, „...which I don’t see happening.”

Rep. Rene Garcia, a Hialeah Republican, said he is trying an alternate route, working with the Department of Business and Professional Regulation, to see if the racing permit can be reinstated administratively.

„My intention is to save the park, come hell or high water,” he said.

Promoters of the slots amendment warn privately that if the referendum fails on Jan. 29, there is no chance legislators in Tallahassee will expand gambling. That means video lottery terminals and Hialeah racing dates would also be dead.

Robaina remains determined: „I think we’ve got enough juice to make it happen.”